

Beasts of the Bible

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Mythology permeates every culture and religion throughout history, each group or sect adhering to their own version of creation, catastrophes, and creatures. In the latter category, many beasts of the past have been chalked up as fiction, equating the mythological or the fantastical with the fake. However, biblical text, which the Christian religion claims as truth through God's word, explicitly mentions several creatures that throughout history have been dismissed as fictitious. The beasts studied include: Nephilim, a race of giants; Leviathan, a fire-breathing dragon of the sea; and Behemoth, an oddity of dinosaur-like proportions. I describe where these creatures appear in biblical context, how they're described, where similar creatures appear in other cultural and religious contexts outside of Christianity, and finally create an image that displays my interpretation of how these creatures might have looked.

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I would like to thank Zach Bardsley for his encouragement and guidance on all-things biblical. His enthusiasm and his faith were the spark that inspired this project.

This project began in a cafeteria. Last summer I went on a mission trip and, sitting in a high school cafeteria elbow-to-elbow with my youth group, someone posed the question, "Is it true that there are giants in the Bible?" My youth pastor, quick to answer and easily excited about any questions regarding biblical text, informed us that yes, in fact there were giants in the Bible, but there weren't just giants, there were also fire-breathing dragons and sea monsters and chimeras and a whole slew of other fantastical beasts. The more he spoke, the more my curiosity grew, and from that discussion this project was born.

Choosing the beasts to study was much simpler than anticipated. While the book of Revelations refers to many different breeds of fantastical creatures, I wanted to pick beasts that were explicitly mentioned in historical biblical text. I chose the Nephilim, a race of giants, as my first beast because giants sparked the initial conversation that brought this project to life. The second creature that stood out to me was the Leviathan, a fire-breathing sea dragon that God describes at length in the book of Job. Choosing a third and final creature was a bit more difficult, but through my research I discovered the Behemoth, a massively proportioned creature with a tail that is "as strong as a cedar" also described in the book of Job alongside Leviathan (New Living Translation, Job 40.17).

At the outset of the project, I knew I was going to create artistic interpretations of each of the three creatures. I initially intended to draw crosshatched pen sketches of each of them, similar to the miniature versions created for the title pages in my artist book. However, the more I researched each of these beasts, the more real they became

to me. I chose to create 24 inch by 36 inch oil paintings instead of the drawings for several purposes: first, it became apparent to me that these creatures were not just fantastical, they were titanic, so I wanted to portray them on a scale that matched their massiveness; secondly, though my painting skills are not the most honed, I felt that creating paintings of them would give them a greater sense of life.

Coming up with artistic interpretations of these creatures was perhaps the most challenging part of this project. The giant seemed easy initially (giants are just larger versions of people, after all), but the more I researched the clearer it became to me that the giants were so much more than just large-scale humans. In Numbers 13, verses 32 and 33 draw a clear distinction between “huge” men and “giants.” It was in reading this passage that I realized that though giants may have displayed human-like characteristics, they were not human. As I read of the destruction they wreaked (described in the book of Enoch), I imagined them less as oversized, chiseled warriors and more like massive, obese terrors. (The one image that kept coming to mind was the Cyclops titan from the animated Disney film “Hercules”.) When the Bible spoke of the Nephilim, I did not imagine the 13 foot Goliath, but the imposing, towering figures of giants that truly reached to the sky and made the average man feel as if he was a grasshopper in the dust (Num. 13.33).

Thinking up a mental image for Leviathan was perhaps the easiest of the three because out of all the creatures God spends the most time describing the Leviathan, going into great detail about his limbs, scales, form, etc. (Job 41.1-34). Additionally, the media is full of depictions of sea serpents as well as dragons. Initially I began to paint

Leviathan as a solitary creature, slithering through the depths of the sea at night. The more I looked at that interpretation, though, the less authentic it felt. One verse continued to stick out to me that later inspired the revised version of my paintings: "Here is the Ocean, vast and wide,/teeming with life of every kind,/both large and small./See the ships go sailing along,/and Leviathan, which you made to play in the sea," (Psalm 104.25-26). The idea that Leviathan belonged in the sea just as any other creature was one I wanted to portray. I liked the juxtaposition of God's description in Job 41 and the poetic voice of Psalm 104, especially after reading that certain Abrahamic traditions thought of Leviathan as a female (The Book of Enoch, 60.7). The two verses show that Leviathan, this powerful "King of Beasts" that makes the sea froth and turn white with its wrath was also created to play, just as any other creature, and swam amongst the boats. It was important to me to display Leviathan in a light that showed it was a creature people in that time knew of and accepted, along with all the other creatures of the sea.

The last creature I researched, Behemoth, was the most difficult of three because though there is much speculation as to what God could have been describing in Job 40, there is no real comparable creature. The Behemoth is a beast that is very specific to Christian and Jewish tradition. As I was researching, I found that historians and scholars have suggested Behemoth was anything from a hippopotamus to an elephant to a type of dinosaur. Though the dinosaur theory most closely fits the description in Job, there are other elements that do not quite fit. For instance, the Behemoth has a tail "as strong as a cedar" but it is also able to be "hidden by the reeds in the marsh" (Job 40.17.21). In

verse 15, God also makes him comparable to an ox. So in trying to artistically interpret what this creature may have looked like, I knew that it was not just dinosaur, nor was it just ox or hippopotamus; it was something other, something more. Since Behemoth is so specific to Abrahamic traditions, fewer representations of this creature appear in media. I chose to portray Behemoth as a horned, dinosaur-type creature because it felt the most authentic to me. According to the book of Enoch, Behemoth was the primordial creature of the land, just as Leviathan was the ultimate creature of the sea (Enoch 6.8). Yet God says of Behemoth, "The mountains offer it their best food/where all the wild animals play" (Job 41.20). Just like Leviathan, though this creature is powerful to the point that only God can tame it, I chose to portray it with the idea that though it is fantastical, it can be peaceful in its natural habitat. People may not be able to tame Behemoth, but he has a place in nature along with the rest of God's creations.

In addition to researching these three beasts and creating depictions of them, I also wanted to show that though most people might dismiss these creatures as mythological or fictitious, similar stories and creatures appear in other cultural and religious contexts that lead me to believe it is not farfetched to believe these creatures actually existed in their most titanic, fantastic forms. As stated in my proposal, people often study cultures and religions as separate entities, analyzing one at a time. Rarely in my experience are cross-cultural similarities studied as a unit. Through this project I discovered that many cultures and religions have common ties in regards to these creatures. Though the Behemoth is particularly specific to Abrahamic traditions, nearly every culture has a giant mythology as well as a serpent, dragon, or sea monster

mythology. The more I researched the appearance of these creatures in different teachings, the more I felt that it was more ridiculous to claim that these creatures never existed, maintaining that each of these cultures fantasized nearly the exact same beasts, than to entertain the idea that these creatures did at one time exist, but their fantastic nature prevented any one culture from fully understanding what they were.

I began this project with the idea that, if one adheres to Biblical teachings, then one is to believe that these beasts did exist at one time. In my opinion, Christians who claim to believe in biblical text should seek to study and understand the Bible as a whole, not just the parts they agree with or that they know from popular Christian culture. Christianity is a subject like anything else. It is one thing to claim to know about the Bible, it is another to truly know about the Bible. That being said, it is my opinion then that no part of the Bible should be overlooked, even (and perhaps especially) the parts that seem most foreign or odd to modern readers. Through this project I gained a further understanding of my personal religious text, as well as how my religious teachings overlap with other cultures and beliefs.

I underwent this project for myself more than anyone else. I wanted a project that would challenge my skill as an artist as well as my role as a Christian. To successfully complete this project I had to go deeper into scripture as well as outside biblical resources than I had ever done on my own, I had to understand other cultural mythologies and their contexts, and I had to artistically display my interpretation as a result of aforementioned research. Ultimately, I consider this project a success because it challenged me and, despite the challenges it posed, I overcame them to produce a

polished, completed project. My hope is that others who interact with this body of work will learn something new from it. They may not have the connection to or interest in it that I have, but if my work intrigues someone, then I consider it a success.

Works Cited

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